

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 21 June 2022

Situating the Role Schools Have Played in the Mindanao Conflict

*Jonamari Kristin Floresta**



Filipino Muslims pray at a mosque during the Eid al-Fitr, marking the end of the holy fasting month of Ramadan, in Marawi City, in southern island of Mindanao on 2 May 2022. The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) was established in 2019 to promote peacebuilding and address historical grievances in Mindanao. Picture: Merlyn MANOS/AFP.

** Jonamari Kristin Floresta is currently the Vice President of ABC Educational Development Center Inc., Philippines. The University of Sydney has awarded her a PhD in Education in the year 2020.*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Over the years, formal education has influenced the development of radical views among insurgency leaders in Mindanao.
- Along with the desire for protection, schools can reinforce radicalism among young people in Mindanao by perpetrating structural violence and through certain micro interactions in schools.
- Developing understanding attitudes towards people with different beliefs in schools is an important consideration in peacebuilding. Such environments allow students to develop their identities amidst competing political influences.
- A school situated in a conflict-ridden area that promotes only one religion is identified as the environment that least encourages diversity.

INTRODUCTION

The conflict in Mindanao, the southern part of the Philippines, has been intergenerational wherein the struggles of the previous generation are carried over to the next. Amidst this division, education has been playing a significant role. The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) was established in 2019 and is under transition until 2022 to promote peacebuilding and address historical grievances among Muslims in Mindanao. The provision of the new Bangsamoro government in BARMM includes establishing, managing, and supporting an education system for the region that shall be a “subsystem of the national education system” [1]. Thus, these reforms seek to create avenues to counter violence in the region’s education system.

In the second quarter of 2021 the Bangsamoro Education Code was signed which included peace education as the educational system’s core component [2]. This code is designed to foster a “culture of non-violence, social justice and respect for human rights, freedom, and inclusivity” and this shall be integrated in the curriculum of every educational level [1, 2]. Peace education can be used in schools for students to build resilience against extremist ideologies [3].

Several peace agreements between the Philippine government and insurgents have been established in the past. However, peacebuilding in Mindanao was repeatedly challenged by breakaway insurgent groups (see Appendix I), political corruption, and the instability of law and order. Some educational institutions have contributed to this instability by becoming venues where students can be recruited to participate in the conflict.

Nevertheless, formal education is an undervalued asset in countering violent extremism; significant attention of scholars and policies is still in its early stages [4]. This article presents cases of ideological development among founding leaders of different insurgency groups in Mindanao after they were exposed to certain educational institutions, and using the case of the Marawi siege, studies how conflict further puts pressure on interfaith relations in schools and the education of young people. Furthermore, this article analyses how schooling and religious practices contribute to conflict in the Mindanao.

EDUCATION AND THE RADICALIZED FOUNDERS OF INSURGENCY

Experiences in schools have significantly contributed to the identities of several Muslim insurgency leaders in Mindanao. Such is the case where Abubakar Janjalani, the founder of the Abu Sayyaf group, is concerned. The group’s original ideology was deeply anchored in their founder’s religious and political ideology [5]. Janjalani was educated by a

fundamentalist imam in the local community [6]. The opportunity to travel and study in different Muslim countries contributed to the development of Janjalani's 'radical Islamic thought' [7]. In 1981, Janjalani received a 'very good' Islamic education in Saudi Arabia [5]. He then went to Mecca to study Islamic jurisprudence for three years and was 'deeply attracted' to the concept of jihad [5]. In 1988, Janjalani journeyed to Pakistan and meticulously studied the Islamic revolution in Iran [5]. Janjalani recruited disaffected youth from conflict-ridden areas in Mindanao when he returned to the country and started the Abu Sayaff group [6]. This group has been responsible for extreme violence against Christian missionaries, bombings and kidnapping locals and tourists for ransom to fund their cause [7]. Before he died, Janjalani delivered eight radical sermons and these are used as the primary source for the study of his radical Islamic thought [5]. All these circumstances indicate that Janjalani was well educated and his deep grasp of Wahabi Islam 'greatly informed' his radical ideology [5].

Similarly, after obtaining their education in the Middle East, the Maute brothers, Omar and Abdullah, founded the Islamic State Philippines and pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria [8]. Likewise, Omar was known for his 'strict Wahabi views'; these caused his expulsion as a teacher from his in-laws' Islamic boarding school in Indonesia [9]. However, the exact trigger for the Maute brothers' radicalism remains unknown; other factors, such as family connections to insurgency, may have contributed to the formation of their ideology. Nevertheless, religious education was used by the group to strengthen their cause. Their group provided studies about the Qur'an among their young Muslim recruits in Mindanao [9]. They organized the Marawi incident in 2017 and attracted around 40 foreigners from Southeast Asia and as far as Yemen and Morocco [8, 10].

Between 1958 and 1967, 8,000 Muslim scholars were politicized during their time at the University of the Philippines, a government funded institution in Manila [11]. One of the scholars, Nur Misuari, became the founder of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). He was influenced by student activism on campus who were left-wing partisans with Maoist ideology [12]. Misuari's exposure to political activism on campus, experience of bias against Muslims in the capital, and the developed ability to articulate his frustrations against Christian cultural hegemony fuelled his political cause, eventually leading to the formation of MNLF [11]. This group started the modern stage of unrest in Mindanao and has been a source of several breakaway insurgency groups [13].

Beyond the conflict in Mindanao, some universities and schools throughout the country have been grounds where the New People's Army (NPA) recruit young people to participate in their terrorist activities which include taking up arms, kidnapping, drug trafficking, and extortion [14]. A former member revealed that 90 percent of NPA's cadres were recruited from schools and universities and recruitment usually starts through "legal organizations" infiltrated by communists [15]. NPA patterns its armed struggle to China's Maoist movement and seek to overthrow the current Philippine government and replace it with a new people's democratic state led by the working class [16]. NPA allegedly uses alternative

learning schools in the provinces of Mindanao as a front to indoctrinate indigenous tribes with subversive ideas and provide them with military training so that they can contribute to their war against the government [17].

Despite the evident role of formal education in shaping the political inclinations of future leaders of insurgency groups and its members, the exact processes that trigger radicalization remain unknown. The following section shall analyse the tensions in educating the youth and interfaith relationships, using the case of the Marawi siege which occurred in 2017.

EDUCATION AND INTERFAITH RELATIONSHIPS AFTER THE MARAWI SIEGE

BARMM has the lowest participation and completion rates across all levels of formal education [18][33]. Before the 2017 conflict in Marawi, a city in BARMM, only 71.9% school-age children were enrolled [19]. The Marawi siege has further dampened the conditions of education there. Twenty-two public schools out of 69 were severely damaged and remained inaccessible, disrupting more than 86,000 children and displacing 22,174 students from Marawi City [20].

After two months post-Marawi's liberation, the Department of Education conducted activities that fostered schooling among young people. Reportedly, around 30,000 displaced learners from Marawi were admitted to public schools nationwide [21]. Moreover, NGOs encouraged education in Marawi by providing temporary learning spaces and back-to-school kits, training teachers in child protection, and motivating students to go back to school [22]. However, despite the education provided in evacuation centres, the learners are continually challenged by inadequate numbers of committed staff, and of teaching materials and facilities [23]. Furthermore, many young survivors from the siege could not continue their education due to poor economic conditions, trauma, and loss of personal school items [23].

The interfaith relationship between Christians and Muslims deteriorated due to the siege in Marawi. Non-Muslims were often the target of the Maute Group during the siege. Muslims in Marawi repeated stories of how they would risk their lives to save and protect the non-Muslims who were either their friends, neighbours or employees, from the terror of the Maute group [23]. These incidences indicate interfaith coexistence was present in the city. However, after the siege, a "sweeping generalization against Muslims" became prevalent in Marawi, associating them with ISIS [24].

Discrimination has likewise affected Muslim students as bullying caused some to cease going to school [23]. Children of internally displaced Muslims were discriminated for their faith and their inability to change clothes or bathe, living as they did in condensed

evacuation sites and having lost most of their personal properties [23]. Feelings of being discriminated against were further exacerbated among displaced students since schools to which they were admitted placed them in special classes [23].

Education is recognized as an important social tool during conflicts as it provides safe spaces for young people [22]. It is therefore important to expedite the reconstruction of schools. However, it is also equally important to address the difficulties experienced by students; discrimination, economic difficulties and trauma can serve as barriers to their learning. Without educational qualifications and means to achieve personal economic stability, disaffected young people situated in conflict areas are more attracted to become combatants or engage in illegal activities [25]. In cases where religion has been used as an element to recruit and ignite the conflict, schools with the right culture can serve as common grounds where interfaith relationships can be restored.

The focus in the next section is on how schools' different religious cultures influence the way students coexist and embrace diversity.

RELIGIOUS CULTURES IN SCHOOLS

Religion is an important aspect in the culture of Mindanao. There are two major religions in that Philippine region—Christianity and Islam. Tensions between these groups have long been surfacing, and the conflict in Mindanao has largely been driven by external and internal colonization [26].

After analyzing six schools situated in three regions in Mindanao which have been most affected by conflict, I have found that religious culture influences the ways students who experience conflict view people with different religious beliefs [27]. The participants of the study were 15 to 20 years old and have experienced difficulties from war which include displacement, threats of physical safety, hostage, death of a loved one, extreme poverty, or recruitment to insurgency, to name a few. Thirty-six students participated in the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with art-based activities. The study focused on variations in students' perception of people with different religious beliefs.

The religious cultures of these schools are grouped into three categories, mainly based on the ways these schools promote religious beliefs in their curriculum and policies, the diversity of the population, and the occurrence of religious worship/s on school grounds. The religious cultures of these schools are clustered into three groups: Diverse religious culture, Limited to absent religious culture and One-religious culture.

Three schools that participated in the study were classified under the Diverse religious cultures. These promote both Islam and Christianity through their policies, curriculum, and

religious worships. Consequently, the population of these schools include a diversity of students and teachers from both religions. No segregation based on religious belief and preferential treatment was felt by the participants of these schools. For example, during the focus group discussion, a student from one of the three schools said:

“Then what’s different here is the fairness, of culture and religion...All those that are wearing hijabs you can see that they are the ones that are Muslims. Then all those who are not wearing them are Christians.”

The Muslim students collectively express their appreciation for this policy and sees it to be promoting their religious identity.

Despite the knowledge of their differences in religion, students from these three schools viewed people with different religious belief to be their “siblings”. For example, during the one-on-one interview, a student from the three schools says: “Even if you’re a Christian or a Muslim it’s like we are siblings. The teacher has no preference on whom to love.”

To reiterate, these participants have directly experienced war, and yet they still developed a close friendship with peers from different religious beliefs.

There are two schools that have limited religious teachings and no regular schedule for religious worship. These schools are classified under the Limited to Absent religious culture. As discussed, the study of religion in these schools is limited to a more general view of God as the highest authority. Teachers informally provide religious classes, but students do not always comply, for example where the wearing hijab for Muslims is concerned. Moreover, students of these schools are exposed to people from different religious backgrounds. They are taught to respect the religious beliefs of others and to avoid conflict. Participants of these schools derive their motivation of respecting others and from avoiding conflicts or negative consequences.

An Islamic school was identified as one promoting one religion among their students. This is classified as One-religious culture. The school’s curriculum, policies, and religious worship advocated Islam and Arabic culture, and their students have little interaction with people from other religious groups because of the limited diversity in school and in their community. Apart from subjects mandated at the national level by the government, students from One-religious culture also study another branch of education influenced by Islamic studies. The students say that their subjects such as Math, Science, History and Language are embedded within the Middle Eastern culture. These lessons have given the participants the perception that they are qualified to judge the actions of others and that they have the ability to ‘know right from wrong.’

Students from the school with one religious culture have developed a negative perception of people who do not practice the same rituals as them and of students who study in secular

schools. For these students, there is a “difference between a true Muslim and just a Muslim,” and they tend to think that latter should be “punished” in the afterlife. The students of these schools also expressed the need for Filipino Christians or nonbelievers to “go back to be a Muslim”, as a participant said that originally everyone was from this religion. Moreover, students from this school identified the need and their responsibility to teach others about Islam, and some participants do this in their local community.

Out of the three religious cultures found in the participating school, it was shown that One-religious culture was the school environment that least encouraged diversity. Students from this school were less sensitive to people with different beliefs and expressed superiority among those who were different from them by their desire to impose their belief and by calling out those who had different religious practices. However, the community, society outside school, and the politicized interactions with teachers have also shaped these students’ perception apart from the religious cultures. Students from One-religious culture have told me that they were motivated by their teachers to study well so that they could help the movement for attaining independence for Mindanao.

A prominent theme that emerged in school environments with diverse religious culture is that it provides a conducive place wherein students feel that each of their religious identities are equally given importance. Through these experiences, students learn to understand, collaborate, and communicate with each other despite their differences and their hostile experience. The way a school creates a culture of religion affects their students’ way of interacting with people with different beliefs, and consequently, peacebuilding and the ability to live with diverse people. Learning to get along with diverse people is important particularly in any conflict-ridden environment with ethnic and cultural diversities, such as Mindanao.

CONCLUSION

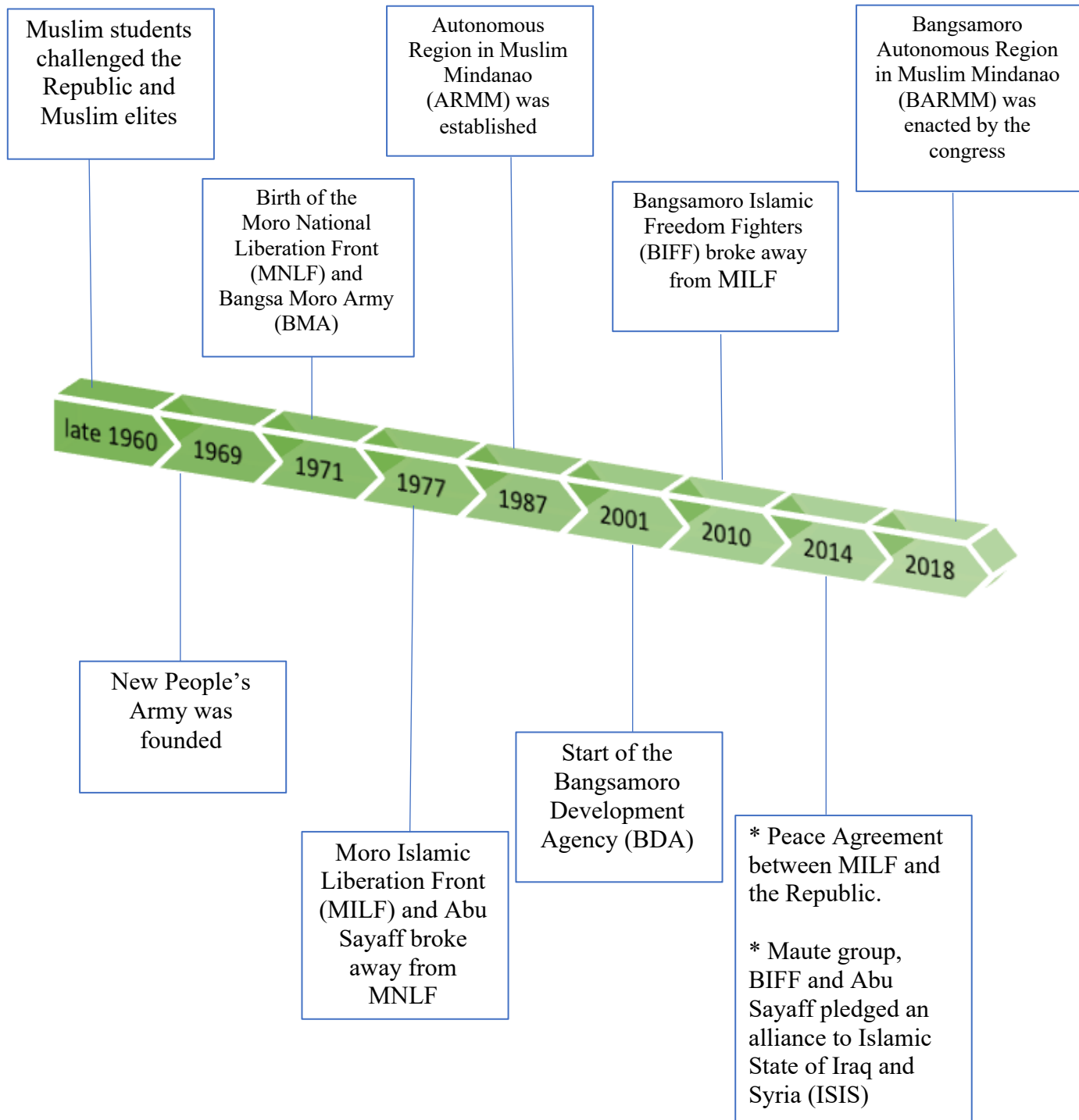
Founders of insurgency who have changed the political landscape of Mindanao were influenced by their formal education. The case in Marawi has shown that conflict influenced by religion can dampen ties between opposing religious groups. In turn, this may posit more challenges in educating young people affected by conflict and the policies in Mindanao that pursue peace.

Schools shape the minds of future leaders and citizens of a country. Hence, more attention must be given to how cultures are created in these social spaces. This perspective shows that religion and interfaith dialogue in schools situated in conflict affected areas can be used as a tool to promote peace. The new education system in BARMM which fosters peace education must consider how interfaith dialogue in schools can foster good relationships and aid students to learn how to live with people who have different beliefs.

Deliberate forging against violence in schools and the community must be emphasized, since each institution now creates different environments that encourage nuances of identities among their students. Leaders and educators must be challenged to refine existing policies towards concretely fostering peace.

APPENDIX I

Timeline of the Birth of Insurgency Groups and Peace Processes



References

1. *Bangsamoro Autonomy Act No. 18*. 2019.
2. *BARMM education code signed into law*. 2021, Bangsamoro Information Office.
3. Ahmed, Z.S., *A critique of the need and application of peace education in Pakistan*. Asian Journal of peacebuilding 2018. **6**(2018): p. 199-222.
4. Halafoff, A., K. Lam, and G. Bouma, *Worldviews education: Cosmopolitan peacebuilding and preventing violent extremism*. Journal of Beliefs & Values 2019. **40**(3): p. 381-395.
5. Banlaoi, R., *The Abu Sayyaf Group: From mere banditry to genuine terrorism*. Southeast Asian Affairs 2006: p. 247-262.
6. Frake, C., *Abu Sayyaf: Displays of Violence and the Proliferation of Contested Identities among Philippine Muslims*. American Anthropologist, 1998. **100**(1): p. 41-54.
7. Hutchison, B.G., *Abu Sayyaf*, in *The Counterproliferation Papers Future Warfare* U.A.F.C. Center, Editor. 2009, Air University: Alabama.
8. Gunaratna, R., *The Siege of Marawi: A Game Changer in Terrorism in Asia*. Terrorist Trends and Analyses 2017. **9**(7).
9. Hwang, C., *Relatives, Redemption, and Rice: Motivations for Joining the Maute Group*, in *Combating Terrorism Center* 2019.
10. Morales, N.J. and A. Tom, *The Maute Brothers: Southeast Asia's Islamist 'time bomb'*, in *Reuters*. 2017.
11. McKenna, T., *The Origins of the Muslim Separatist Movement in the Philippines*. Asia Society.
12. Exconde, B., *Are People from the University of the Philippines Really Activists?* 2018, The Lobbyist.
13. Cook, M. and K. Collier, *Mindano: a gamble worth taking*. 2006, Double Bay, NSW: Longueville Media. 82.
14. Cudis, C., *UP freshmen, admin warned vs. NPA recruitment*, in *Philippine News Agency*. 2021.
15. Moaje, M., *90% of NPA cadres recruited from schools: ex-commie*, in *Philippines News Agency*. 2020.
16. *Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army*. 2018, Mapping Militant Organizations: Stanford University.

17. Reganit, J.C., *NPA uses alternative schools as 'training ground' for rebels: IPs*, in *Philippine News Agency*. 2019.
18. *Unlocking the Potential of the Bangsamoro People through the Alternative Learning System*. 2019, World Bank Group.
19. Cornelio, J. and S. Calamba, *Going home: youth and aspirations in postconflict Marawi, Philippines*. *Journal of Youth Studies* 2022.
20. *Summary Assessment of Damage and Needs, in Emergency Assistance for Reconstruction and Recovery of Marawi: Report and Recommendation of the President no 17*. 2018, Asian Development Bank.
21. *DepEd addresses challenges in education as it honors Marawi Siege anniversary*, in *Manila Bulletin*. 2020.
22. *Three years after Marawi siege, children face new battle against COVID-19*. 2020, Save the Children: Relief Web.
23. Shahpur, T., *Marawi Rebuilding from ashes to a city of faith hope and peace*. 2021, Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies.
24. *An interfaith perspective on the Marawi crisis*. 2022, University of Santo Tomas.
25. Findings first presented in Floresta, J.K., *Undoing a culture of violence in schools by hearing the subalterned students who experience war in Mindanao*. *Journal of Peace Education* 2021. **18**(3): p. 260-281.
26. Milligan, J.A., *Faith in School: Education Policy Responses to Ethno-Religious Conflict in the Southern Philippines, 1935-1985*. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 2005. **36**(1): p. 67-86.
27. Floresta, J.K., *Forming Views towards People of Different Faith: School's Religious Culture and the Perceptions of Students who Experience Conflict in Mindanao*. *Religious Education* 2020. **115**(2): p. 129-144.

<p><i>ISEAS Perspective</i> is published electronically by: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute</p> <p>30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace Singapore 119614 Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955 Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735</p> <p>Get Involved with ISEAS. Please click here: https://www.iseas.edu.sg/support/get-involved-with-iseas/</p>	<p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed.</p> <p>Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.</p> <p>© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.</p>	<p>Editorial Chairman: Choi Shing Kwok</p> <p>Editorial Advisor: Tan Chin Tiong</p> <p>Editorial Committee: Terence Chong, Cassey Lee, Norshahril Saat, and Hoang Thi Ha.</p> <p>Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng</p> <p>Editors: William Choong, Lee Poh Onn, Lee Sue-Ann, and Ng Kah Meng</p> <p>Comments are welcome and may be sent to the author(s).</p>
---	---	--